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Interview with Bert G. Clifford by Greg Beam

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Clifford, Bert G.

Interviewer

Beam, Greg

Date

August 10, 2000

Place

Unity, Maine

ID Number

MOH 222

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Biographical Note

Bert Clifford was born in Troy, Maine and raised in Unity, Maine. His parents were Bert Warren and Mamie Izora Clifford. In his youth he worked as a farmhand and drove the local school bus. In the 1940s he enlisted in the Navy. Eventually he began investing in local companies including utilities and a railroad. He was also involved in local politics, which is where he encountered Senator Muskie. The two corresponded frequently. Clifford, a long-time Democrat, now oversees community projects and businesses, including Unity College.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: family background; Navy; meeting Muskie, Twombly, and Curtis; local politics; bridge on Lake Winnecook; Manchester, New Hampshire incident; Belfast-Moosehead Railroad; Unity College; future of the Democratic Party; Muskie's legacy; and the Unity, Maine community.

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Greg Beam: The date today is August the 10th, 2000 and this is Greg Beam, and I'm here with Bert Clifford at the Unity Telephone Company in Unity, Maine. To begin, could you please state your full name and spell it?

Bert Clifford: My full name is Bert G. Clifford, and Bert is spelled B-E-R-T. And my middle initial is G., because I have a grandson named Bert Clifford also, and my last name is Clifford, C-L-I-F-F-O-R-D.

GB: And when and where were you born?

BC: I was born in Troy, Maine about four miles up the road towards Bangor.

GB: I see, and did you grow up in Troy?

BC: No, I moved to Unity when I was four years old, and I've lived in Unity all my life, the rest of my life, okay?

GB: Oh wow. And what were your parents' names?

BC: My parents', my father's name was Bert Warren Clifford, and my mother was Mamie Izora Clifford.

GB: And what were their occupations?

BC: Well my father was a farmer, he was just a general farmer. He raised a few dairy cows and dried beans and potatoes. And he worked in the woods a lot. He used to, he used to deal in

stove wood for, and junk wood, for the fireplaces and stoves for the local people. And so I grew up more in or less working in the woods driving a team for my dad, okay? A big pair of draft horses. No, they was just general farmers, okay?

GB: I see. Is Unity a, has it been primarily an agricultural community?

BC: Yes it has, and the main crop here for a long time was dairy and forestry products. And today the dairy has more or less gone by the wayside, but there's still a lot of forestry products and there's still quite a few farmers still left here in Unity.

GB: About how big was the town of Unity when you were growing up, how many people lived here?

BC: Well, the town of Unity, to the amazement of a lot of people, was quite large when I was growing up. It had up to twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six hundred people. And then the population decreased, and it went down as low as about eleven hundred, but now it's back up to around twenty one hundred now, okay, and growing.

GB: What caused the decrease in the population?

BC: I just think that the farms decreased and young people moved away. And a lot of the local, like grist mills and lumber mills and things like that just closed down, okay, there was nothing here for young people to stay here for.

GB: Around what time was that?

BC: Oh, this is, oh in the, in the 1915 to 1940, in that area.

GB: Did the Depression have an impact on the town of Unity?

BC: Oh yes, it definitely did, yes it did. I guess if it wasn't for, if we hadn't been farmers so that we kept a lot of things in the cellar and the attic to live on, it would have been a very hard time, okay. I can remember at nighttime on Sunday evening we'd have white rice and raisins with the cream and sugar from the cows, okay? That's all we had for dinner.

GB: I see. Do you recall, were your parents interested in politics or active politically at all?

BC: No, my father was not. My father was a person that was in love with his animals and the farm, and he didn't socialize very much. He stayed mostly to the farm and his animals and his family. But my mother, my mother was a little bit different. She wasn't in politics or anything like that, but she did join the Eastern Star and the Rebeccas and she was quite involved in that, okay?

GB: I see, and what were your family's pol-, I'm sorry, religious beliefs?

BC: We're Protestant, and we always have been Protestant. And we went to, when we were

small children my father and mother went to the Unity Union Church here in Unity. And that is where I and my three sisters went to Sunday school, and we was brought up here. I still attend the Unity Union Church here in Union.

GB: Are there, is the community predominantly Protestant?

BC: Yes it is, yes it is. We have a few Jewish families in town, we have a few Catholic people in town, but the majority, I'm going to say eighty to eighty five percent are Protestant, yes.

GB: I see, and did you go to schools right here in Unity?

BC: Yes I did, I attended eight grades here in Unity, and then I walked across the road and went to high school for four years right here in Unity. And I graduated from Unity High School in 1938.

GB: So it probably still doesn't have those high schools around here I'd imagine.

BC: The buildings are still here, okay? The grammar school is used for a storage and maintenance building, and the high school that I went to is the School District Three superintendent's office now.

GB: And what kind of things were you interested in in high school?

BC: Well, truthfully, I was interested in baseball, number one, and I guess maybe in high school girls was second, okay? But I loved to play baseball, and I'd rather play baseball than eat, okay? And I played a lot of baseball in high school, and I played a little semi pro ball after I got out of high school. But after I got married and had a couple children and my wife decided that I had better stay home and take care of the family.

GB: So is that what you did right after high school, played semi pro ball?

BC: Well, just on weekends, that's all, okay? No, right after high school I went to a, oh, a little accounting school down in Gardiner, Maine called the Kennebec School of Commerce. And it was a school where you could go as fast as you wanted to. And I went three or four months in the wintertime. I went during the day, and then they had a night school, and I went right back and went to night school too, and I finished the two year course really in, oh, less than six months. And then I went to work for the Maine Central Railroad as a night stock clerk there, and I worked from twelve o'clock at night until seven o'clock in the morning.

GB: That must have been a rough experience.

BC: It was kind of rough because I was still helping my father on the farm and I was working with my dad during the day. I'd go to bed about five o'clock, my mother would wake me up at eleven o'clock, and I'd drive to Waterville and I'd work from twelve to seven. But it went on quite a while, and I was working for the Maine Central Railroad when the. I was working one weekend and I came out of work and, Sunday afternoon about three o'clock, and turned on my

car radio to come home, and that's when I heard about Pearl Harbor. That's when WWII broke out and I knew very shortly that I would have to go into the service and I wanted to go into the service.

And I didn't want to go into the Army, so I decided that I would enlist in the Navy. And I went up and took my exam, and during the exam they found out I had a deviated septum in my left nostril, and I couldn't breathe. And the Navy wouldn't accept me. And they said the Army would take me and fix my nostril after I got in, and I said no thanks. And I asked them if they would give me thirty days to get my nose fixed, and they couldn't believe that I would go and have it done on my own and, but they gave me thirty days. And I came home and my mother called a Dr. Hill in Waterville. And we went in the next morning and he operated on and straightened my nose, which had been broken five times, and then I went back and enlisted in the Navy. And I spent, lacking two months of being four years in the Navy.

GB: Where were you stationed?

BC: Well, I was stationed in Arlington, Virginia for a while and, at the Navy annex, and I was stationed in Beaver Tail, Rhode Island at a radar station right off from Quonset Point. And then I was transferred onto the U.S.S. Intrepid, a CV-11, which was an aircraft carrier and I spent time on that. And then I was transferred from the Intrepid to the Antietam, which was another aircraft carrier, okay? And that was what I was on, I was just outside of Tokyo Bay when the war ended in 1942, in August 1942, '45 rather, I'm sorry.

GB: Did it have an impact on you, being in the, serving in the Navy?

BC: Well, I guess the biggest impact was that when I left to go in the Navy I did not want to come back to the farm, okay? All I could remember is long hours and no pay, and I says, "There's got to be a better way of living in something than to work on a farm." But it didn't take me very long to, in the Navy, to find out that the farm wasn't the worst place in the world. And not having any brothers I decided that I guess I'd better come home and take care of my mother and father and, which I did, after the service. I came right home and worked for my dad. And then I started my own dairy herd, and I kept that dairy herd up until 1963.

GB: And what did you do at that point?

BC: Well, in 1963, well, before 1963, when I was growing up, I lived just inside the two mile area and they, the town had a ruling that anybody who lived within two miles had to walk to school. Anybody outside of two miles could ride on a school bus. So I walked to school every night and morning for twelve years. And I got a little upset with the children that rode on the school bus because they'd kind of wave at me when I was walking and they went by. And I made up my mind then if I ever had a chance to drive a school bus that I'd pick up any kid that had ambition enough to get outside in the road, and I'd pick him up and I'd take him home, okay?

So once I got out of the service, I got out of the service in October, and the next September the superintendent of schools and a school member came into my dooryard one day and wanted to

know if I still wanted to drive a school bus, and I said, "Yes, I would." And to make a long story short, I bought a school bus, and I drove the school bus for sixteen years. And twelve of those years of the sixteen that I drove, I also hauled chicken, baby chicks, in the school bus from. I'd get up in the morning, milk my cows, take the kids to school, go from the school to the hatchery, local hatchery, (*unintelligible word*) hatchery in Unity, and load up anywhere from ten thousand to twenty three thousand chickens in the new boxes into the school bus and deliver them to farmers in central Maine and go home, take the kids home, go home, milk the cows and go to bed. Okay, so, that was my day for a long time.

GB: Wow, that's interesting. So were you politically active during that time, from after you got out of the service through when you were a bus driver?

BC: Well, right after I got out of the service, my folks had always leaned towards the Democratic Party and so I had leaned that way myself. And I guess the turning point was, when I went to drive the school bus I needed thirty-four hundred dollars to buy the school bus, and I went to the local banker who was a staunch Republican, and he refused to lend me the thirty-four hundred dollars. And I guess that was the turning point there that I made up my mind that I would be, dedicate my life to helping the class of people that needed a helping hand, okay? And I thought the Republican Party didn't represent that type of person.

So in the meantime, when I was growing up, after I got out of the service, I met a young lawyer in Waterville called Ed Muskie. And we got very, become very good friends and he got me interested in the Democratic Party. And the Democrats wasn't very popular in the town of Unity, my hometown. There was very few of us. And so I stood on the Democratic committee in my local town for years, and become chairman of the board from Unity, and that's how I got involved in the Democratic Party.

GB: So how exactly did you meet Ed Muskie, do you remember the circumstances?

BC: No, I just don't quite. I think we, the Democratic Party, was having a field day somewhere and, and I know one field day very particular that we had in Unity at Windemere Park. And it was the time when Frank Coffin was running for an office. And Frank Coffin was from Aroostook County and very well liked, and we was just sitting up there. And we were sitting at a table, and Frank Coffin had a habit of smoking a pipe, he had an old corncob pipe he always had stuck in his mouth. And Ed Muskie looked at Frank, and he said, "My God, Frank, take that damn pipe out of your mouth," he said, "if you want people to vote for you," he said, "they aren't going to vote for that pipe." So I never forgot that as a young man, okay? And Frank Coffin went on to become quite a leader in the Democratic Party. And I guess that's one of the first recollections I had of Ed Muskie.

And then one other time at, at, as I was growing up in my hometown, we had a post office right on Main Street. And the post office had no back door, just a front door, and all the mail had to be lugged through the front door, and the mail truck had to stop out on the main road. And it held up traffic while it was unloading and loading the mail. Also, it didn't have no running water, no restrooms in it. And the postmaster was a man, but his assistant was a woman, and they had to go across the street to a gas station to use the restroom, okay? So I said to myself, I said, "You

know, it would be awful nice if Unity had a new post office.” So I saw Ed Muskie and I said, “Ed, how do I get a new post office down in Unity?” He says, “Well, fill out an application,” okay? And he said, “I’ll send you the application.” So he sent me the application and I filled it out and, and I went to the dem-, the postal real estate man and, with my ideas. And they had a form that they wanted a post office to be built, and I didn’t like the, it looked just like an ordinary building. And I wanted to make something a little bit fancier for my town, so I went to the real estate person and convinced him that I’d put the extra money in to build a post office if they’d let me build it the way I wanted to build it, and they agreed. And the next thing that happened that an announcement come out in the Bangor paper that Unity had been awarded a new post office, and Bert Clifford was going to construct it, okay? And people were very surprised in the town of Unity, and that’s how we got our first new post office with running water, with bathrooms and plenty of parking, through Ed Muskie.

GB: And I imagine that helped you get your feet wet as a business man or -?

BC: Well, it got me interested in my hometown; it got me interested in the Democratic Party. And then down the road a little bit I got involved in the telephone business. I was farming at the time and I had a gentleman call me one morning and wanted to know if he could come down and talk to me. And this was a Sunday morning and I was in the barn at the time, my wife come over and told me. And I said, “If he wants to come down after I get out of the barn at night time,” I says, “I’ll be very happy to talk to him.” Because Sunday morning is, I went to church on Sunday mornings, which I still do, and I liked to spend the afternoon on the children because like I said, I was driving a school bus, milking cows, and delivering chickens. And I didn’t have much chance to stay with my children, and so I liked to stay and have a picnic with my kids on Sunday afternoon. So he came down that Sunday afternoon, that evening, and he wanted to know if I’d be interested in buying some stock in Unity Telephone Co. And my answer was, hell no, I don’t want nothing to do with the telephone company because it didn’t have a very good name. And it had ten people on the line, nobody could use a telephone, nobody could use a line, nobody could get the telephone if they wanted it, and I didn’t think it was a very good opportunity. But to make a long story short, I started the day after Labor Day that year buying stock in Unity Telephone Co., and on the 21st day of April 1963, I acquired fifty one percent of the stock of Unity Telephone Co. So, from going from a person that hated to talk on the telephone, I all of a sudden owned the telephone company, okay? And so I got into the telephone business.

And while I was in the telephone business, while I was working in the telephone business I got another call from a man named Larry Chatter from Orono, Maine. And he was the executive director from, of the ASCS committee in the state of Maine, and he wanted to know if he could come down and talk to me and I said, “Sure, come on down.” So he came down and his proposal was that the Democratic Party had chosen me to be the state chairman of the ASCS committee. And, this was under Secretary of Agriculture Albert Freeman [*sic* Orville Freeman] okay? And this was when John F. Kennedy was the president, okay? And of course I was a very staunch admirer of John F. Kennedy, I thought he was just one of the finest young men that I had known for a long time. And so I accepted the nomination and it was an honor, and I served almost five years as the state chairman, okay? It was a fun time, okay, and Larry Chatter taught me a lot, and I traveled quite a little bit with the company.

And at the same time the position for postmaster came up in my hometown. And I took the exam and I come out on top of the exam and, but they had a ruling at that time that they could take any one of the top three, okay, if they wanted, okay? And at the time the political party that was in power at the present had the right to choose. Okay, so Kennedy was president, and I was still chairman of the ASCS committee, and I liked the job very much. And so I contacted Ed Muskie and I said, "Ed," I said, "gee, I don't know what I want to do, I'd like to stay with the ASCS." But I still, I had served as an RFD carrier for, oh, now I'd had almost seventeen, eighteen years in, okay, as a (*unintelligible word*) carrier towards my retirement, and I needed two more years to retire. So I said, "I need that post office job to retire," okay? He says, "Well," he said, "just stay on the ASCS and appoint your wife as a temporary postmaster." And being chairman of the Democratic Party in the whole town I took the advantage of the privilege, and I appointed my wife as the assistant postmaster, okay? So she served two and a half years, and finally one day I got a call one afternoon from Senator Muskie. And Ed said that, "Bert," he says, "we played the game long enough," he says, "the Republican people are giving me a hard time now," he says, "you either got to accept the post mastership or give it up, okay, one or the other." So I said, "Well," I said, "at this time now there's not choice," I said, "I'll take the post office and let go." We let my wife go and I took over as postmaster in November of 1965. And I served postmaster until March of '77 and I retired with twenty-six years in the postal service and four years in the Navy for thirty years, okay, so. So I've had quite a few contacts with Ed Muskie, and he's helped me a lot in life. And I was so sorry when he was running for president that the situation happened in New Hampshire that did, okay, and, because I think he would have made a fine president, I really do.

GB: Did you keep up a lot of close contact with him, you know, that you would call him up when you needed advice on something, did it happen a lot?

BC: Not a lot as a lot of people do it, okay, but when I got into a situation that I needed some good advice. I didn't bother Ed, you know, but I kept in contact with him all the time. I kept his picture around all the time. He was a good man for the state of Maine, he did an awful lot for the state of Maine. And of course through him I met Governor Curtis which I respect very, very highly. And Governor Curtis and I shared a good friendship for all, long years and we still do, we still do.

GB: Now I understand -

BC: I still got a dollar that I won from Governor Curtis when we played golf one day, and I've got it framed, framed (*unintelligible phrase*).

GB: Really? Now, I understand that you campaigned for Muskie early on, back in the fifties?

BC: Oh yes, yes I did, yes I did, yeah, because I thought he was, I thought he was the best thing that had happened to the state of Maine for a long, long time.

GB: So you were excited to hear when he, that he was running for governor?

BC: Oh absolutely, absolutely.

GB: Now, being from a strongly Republican town in a strongly Republican state, did you really think that he stood a chance to win that year?

BC: Truthfully? No, I didn't think he had a chance to win. But I was delirious when he did win, I was, I really was. And I was very proud at the way he run the governorship and the decisions he made, and I thought he, I thought that was the beginning of the change in the state of Maine, okay? I think that's when the state of Maine started getting away from that so goes Maine the rest of the nation's going to go and all that stuff, you know. No, I think that, no, with Muskie and Frank Coffin and Ken Curtis I think we picked some pretty good people.

GB: So you mentioned Muskie and Coffin, did you know a lot of other figures in the Democratic Party back, way back when, you know, forties, fifties, sixties?

BC: Oh, I knew quite a few of them but the thing is now, that was quite a while ago, and the names, names don't come to me right now.

GB: Well let me throw some out at you, see if you knew them or can tell me about them. What about Guy Twombly?

BC: Guy Twombly? Well, the first time I run into Guy Twombly I played, he played baseball and basketball for Brooks, Brooks High School, and I played for Unity High School, okay? So that's where we, that's where we met and our rivalry started, okay? And then of course he got elected to the Public Utility Commission, you know, in the office there as an engineer. And when I got into the telephone company of course we had contact, well not to say every day but every week we had contact. Because it, at the time I got into the telephone company we had a lot of open wire and stuff like that and we was changing over from the open wire to cable and stuff like that and, oh, to get engineering advice I was practically in his office every week and so, for a while. No, Guy, I have a high respect for Guy. And Guy and his wife have a cottage up here on Lake Winnecook, in Unity, and we provided him with telephone for a long time.

GB: Could you tell me about his personality?

BC: Well, on the whole we got along pretty good. Some of the things that I wanted to do in the telephone company, that I thought that the, that the commission tried to manage our every day affairs, you know, call the shots and try to tell us what we should do, what we shouldn't do, okay? We disagreed there, Guy and I did, quite a lot, okay. But we, on the whole we got along real well. He was a fine gentleman and if he, if he said something to you his word was good as gold, okay?

GB: I hear he was a real strong Democrat, did you see that?

BC: Yeah, yeah, that's one thing that he and I had in common, that we thoroughly agreed on.

GB: What about Eben [Ebenezer] Elwell?

BC: Eben Elwell, knew him well, knew him well. Eben Elwell come out of Brooks and, oh, there was a woman down in Brooks, she was a strong Democrat. Oh, she was a big woman, oh my goodness, what was her name? Well, it doesn't make any difference now, but no, Eben Elwell was a good Democrat, he supported the Democrats. He was one of the Democrats that really, he wouldn't be anything else but a Democrat. I can't say anything but good for Eben, okay, as far as I'm concerned he was a fine guy.

GB: What about Neil Bishop?

BC: Neil Bishop? I didn't know him very well, no.

GB: Oh really, what about Ed Greeley?

BC: Ed Greeley? I knew Ed Greeley very well, okay, and of course all, we got along, Ed Greeley and I got along fine. The only thing is, I tried to get Ed Greeley to fix the roads here in Unity a lot, okay, and I couldn't get him to. He seemed to want to fix everything in the southern part of Waldo county and not up here in the northern part of Waldo county, okay, but. And Ed Greeley was a dairy farmer, just like I was, okay, and we went to the dairy meetings and things like that. I didn't have very close contact with Ed Greeley, but I knew him very well as a dairy farmer and as a Democrat, yeah.

GB: It sounds like the Democratic Party early on had a lot of support from farmers around this area. Did you know a lot of people who were involved in agriculture who supported the Democratic Party, did you find that to be true?

BC: Well I knew there was a lot of, I knew that, I knew a lot of people in the farming industry because I was a dairy farmer for years and years, and I went to the Dairy Associations and, like that. But the thing is that I saw the Democratic Party grow in the farmers and like that, through people like Ed Muskie and things like that. Once the Democratic Party could get some good leadership I could see it start growing all the time. But like I said, when we first started we was in the minority, there's no question about that, and it was a hard row.

GB: How did, did you observe how Ed Muskie interacted with these other Democratic, kind of Democratic leaders early on?

BC: Well Ed, Ed no question was a leader, okay? He could get, he could talk to people, and he could get the people to follow him, okay. And he would explain what he wanted to do and why he wanted to do it, and so he was just an absolutely born leader, that's all. He was a good man.

GB: So he just kind of understood that you, so he was sort of a real figurehead in the Democratic Party?

BC: Yes, he was someone to, (*unintelligible word*) President Kennedy, okay? You could be with him and hear him speak, you know, and all of a sudden you just had the urge to support him, okay, and help him. Ed Muskie was one of those people.

GB: During his time as governor or in the federal senate, do you recall any legislation that he put through, anything that he was involved in that was of particular interest to you?

BC: Well, I guess the thing that, locally that he helped us, in 1954 we had a severe storm come through here, and it caused a lot of flooding, and we lost five people here and, during the flood. And after that I worked with a group on a committee that, to see if we couldn't, oh, it was called a twenty five mile watershed project, okay, and we worked on that from 1955 until 197-, middle 1970s. And what it was, there was the inlet and outlet to Winnecook is the same, and the thing is that right before the inlet and the outlet there was three very bad curves in that (*unintelligible word*). And through the soil conservation committee and Ed Muskie's help in fact, we got permission to build a dam in the river, straighten the three curves, put in, take out three bridges, put in just one, and widen the stream. And, so we could control the flow of the water in the lake, Lake Winnecook.

And we got it all ready and approved and we got a two million dollar grant from the federal government. And the only thing that the town of Unity had to come up with was five thousand dollars over five years to put the cap on the new bridge, that's all it demanded, okay? And to, but three weeks before the vote, two men in the town of Unity, both of them staunch Republicans, okay, went around to all the people in the town of Unity. They wanted to know, just said to people, "Do you want your taxes to go up?" And of course nobody wants their taxes to go up, okay. And they said, "Well if you vote for that you're always going to be paying higher taxes to keep the stream open, you know, so that the water can go in and out."

We had the meeting and we got turned down, turned down, two million dollars, we got turned down for five thousand dollars over five years. They couldn't believe it. The government couldn't believe it. Ed Muskie couldn't believe it. We was absolutely devastated. And now, you talk about it today and everybody said what a terrible mistake it was. We could have had it now, our lake up here now, when it gets real hot and low in the summer time the rocks come up, you know. And it's hard to maneuver power boats in there, you know, you clip off the shear pins and everything else, you know. But the thing is, we can't control the flow of that lake, okay? So it got turned down just by two guys, and they were both Republicans, okay? Another reason why I'm still a good Democrat. I haven't changed my thinking. And right now, well, I'm one of those people that, yes, Clinton made a mistake, okay, but the thing is that I feel that what he did was no more than I would have done to protect my family, okay? And I don't think, I think they blew it way out of proportion compared to what has happened in the past, okay? And I think right now if Clinton was, had the opportunity to run for another term right now he'd win hands down, right today. He could have another, third term just like Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Right now, I think it, I think the election this year's going to be close, but I still hope and pray that Gore can pull it out. Because I, boy, I'd hate to see, I'd hate to see Bush in there as president, okay, because I feel the Kennedy's were killed because of the oil, big oil, I still do right to this day. Because they was against that tax that the government allows them, you know, to explore, you know, for oil. And I still think that's why Kennedy was shot and Robert Kennedy both, because once Kennedy was gone we got Lyndon in there. Where was he from, Texas, okay? Where big oil is, okay? Just like the article in the paper here last week, that the

GOP stands for Grand Ol' Petroleum Company, okay? That's just what they are, talk big oil. Okay.

GB: All right, well, do you have any more of those stories, those political stories like the one about the dam?

BC: No, no, I guess that was, that was -

GB: That was a big one?

BC: That hurt this area very, very much, because, boy we, everybody you talk to now says they wish they had the dam in there now. You know, they should have gone for it. And now they realize it was one of the biggest mistakes that our town has ever made, okay?

GB: I see. Now, did you continue to support Muskie all through his political career?

BC: Absolutely, yeah.

GB: Did you campaign for him?

BC: Campaigned for him, I contributed to his financial thing as much as I could, yeah, sure did.

GB: And did you maintain personal contact with him over the years?

BC: Right up until the day he died, yup.

GB: And did you see him changing personally over the years from his involvement in politics, did it take a toll on him at all?

BC: Well, I saw a big change after the incident that happened in New Hampshire, I saw a big change in him. But then when he was appointed the secretary of state I see another Muskie come out, come forward, you know, that most people didn't realize that he had the capabilities of. He was just a, just a super guy, just a super guy. He was a born leader, that's all, no question about it.

GB: So you think, so you think it really had a negative impact on him in '72, you think he really wanted to win that race?

BC: Yes I do, yes I do.

GB: Tell me, was Muskie's environmental work relevant to the environment around here? Did that have any impact on agriculture or people's interest around here?

BC: Well, really I'm not in a position to comment on that.

GB: Sure, sure.

BC: Probably there's no question that it did, but I don't have anything I can put my finger on.

GB: Sure, sure. Now, I understand that besides the telephone company you've been involved with some other businesses.

BC: A few.

GB: Could you tell me about the Belfast-Moosehead Railroad?

BC: Yes, I, as you know, right now I own Belfast-Moosehead Lake Railroad a hundred percent. I got involved with the railroad, there was two gentlemen that bought the railroad from the city of Belfast and it was pretty well run down. And these two gentlemen, their main idea was to salvage the track, and sell it for junk, and get as much out of it they thought they could. And that was their main reason to buy it in the first place. But once they got looking at it, you know, and things like that and in the meantime I, living in the town of Unity I was going by the old depot up here, the old railroad station up here, and the roof was leaking. The windows was broken and everybody was dumping rubbish around it and everything else, and growing up trees and bushes. And I says, you know, that's a crime, you know, because I could remember growing up as a kid; I used to beg my mother and father to take me to the railroad station so I could see the train come in, okay, the old steam engine puffing the old smoke. And it hauled mail in three days, it made three trips a day from Burnham to Belfast, hauling the mail and the milk from Unity to Boston in a car. And so I went to them and I said, well, I went to these two gentlemen and I said, "Well, if you have no use for the old station up there would you sell it to me," and they said, "sure." So we figured a price and I bought it.

I had a picture of the railroad station, what it looked like in 1924, okay. And I took it to a friend of mine who's a jack of all trades and I said, "Can you restore that so it looks like that picture," and he said, "Sure." So he worked all summer and he put all the trim back on it, and fixed the roof, and put the glass back in the windows. And we painted it and everything else, put the sign back on and put the signals, cleaned up and everything else and brought it right back to what it looked like in 1924. And so then the two guys come to me, and they said, "Well why don't you get into the railroad business with us," okay. And I said, "The only reason I would ever get into that railroad business was if I could find an old fashioned steam engine, okay, the old steam engine. Other than that I have no interest in the railroad at all, okay, as far as operating it and running it." They left, and ten days later they were right back in my office and they said they'd found a steam engine. And I said, I figured well, they found an old junker somewhere, you know, that's no good. But what they had found through a broker, a steam engine in Sweden, that they had put away in caves and covered up. And they put them in these caves and, figuring that the price of oil would go so high that some day they might have to go back to coal, you know. And, but that didn't happen, the oil didn't go up, and then they, the need of trains went from the old steam engines, the slow ones, to the high speed trains, so they had no use for them. So they decided to take them out of the caves and sell them, okay. And so we went over with the idea to buy a steam engine and attendant, okay, that's all. Now we went over and we came back with not only the steam engine and the tender but ten other cars, too. Five passenger cars, two dining cars, a sleeper car, you know, so the whole shooting match. But anyway, we brought them all

back by boat, brought them into Searsport, unloaded them there, put them on a track and brought them back to Unity.

Shortly thereafter they run into a problem in Belfast, and the city of Belfast, with the city of Belfast, and one of the gentlemen came up to me and he said, "We'd like to move the whole headquarters to Unity, to hell with Belfast, we want to move to Unity." They don't want us down there, we want to move to Unity. And I said, well, if you're going to move to Unity, I said, you got to sign a paper that you'll move to Unity but you won't move it back, okay? You'll always leave it in Unity. And they wrote me a letter out and signed the whole thing, and so we moved the whole thing to Unity, the headquarters.

It was, well it made the city of Belfast mad, unhappy, but anyway, but it went on and finally to make a long story short I bought out both my partners, and so now I own it a hundred percent myself. And we're hauling freight, we're hauling freight for Crowrow, and we're hauling passengers from Unity, and we're hauling passengers from Belfast. And right now it's doing very well. So I think it's one of the finest attractions that we have in the state of Maine. It's the only regular gauge steam engine operating in the state of Maine, right here in Unity. And we haul, we haul between twenty and twenty three thousand people a year, and that's people that wouldn't come to Unity if it hadn't been for the train. That's one of my other toys I'm involved with.

GB: One second, I'm going to - . . .

End of Side A
Side B

GB: All right. Now your other third business venture, I guess, is Unity College?

BC: Yes. I founded Unity College back in 19-, well we started in 1963 actually, and I had the assistance of nine other business people in town. And, but Unity College got started because of, my wife and I had one son and he graduated from Unity High School in 1963. He was the first one to be accepted to college, he always wanted to go to Maine Maritime Academy in Castine, and we were so happy for him. And he passed two of his exams, had been measured for his uniforms and everything else and then he had to go to Massachusetts, down to the Fargo Building to pass the Navy exam, because anybody that graduates from Maine Maritime can right into the regular Navy as an officer, okay? He went down there and to our sorrow he got tripped up on a colorblind test. And, he was color blind, green and white, what you and I would see as green and white he would, it would be right the opposite to him, so they wouldn't accept him.

Well, then the, I made one of the biggest mistakes in my life, I tried to get him into the University of Maine. I knew Mark Sibels of the Uni-, of admissions up there and, but I couldn't get him in. And then I started looking around the state of Maine, and I just found out to my surprise there was no other schools except for business school that would take my boy, okay? And my boy wasn't an exceptional student, he was a C+ student, average, okay. So we started looking around and instead of saying, let's take a year off and relax and get our bearings. I never went to college myself, I'm not a college graduate, I never attended a day of regular college. We

found a college out in New Hampshire that had been started five years, so we went out there and he went out there for three years to school out there and, to an excellent school out there called Belknap College. And then we decided, well, if they can start one out there, why can't we start one in Unity? So we got the idea together, and we went back and we hired the guy that started the college out there to come and help us start this one here. His name was Bert Dittus, D-I-T-T-U-S, and he stayed with us for three years, and we opened the doors in September of 1965 with twenty-nine students. And today they have over five hundred and, thirty-five years later, and it's still going.

GB: So I imagine that helped a lot of young people in this rural community to get a college education?

BC: It helps a lot of students. Right now we've got over, like I said we have over five hundred students up here, attending school up here, they have a budget of almost nine million dollars a year. There isn't many businesses around that have a budget of nine million dollars in a small town of two thousand people. And they employ a hundred and twenty people. Quite an impact.

GB: Do I have it right that Muskie's office helped out financially in establishing Unity College?

BC: No, not really, no, no.

GB: No, no, okay. I had a note that there may have been some federal grants, may have helped with some federal grants. That's not right?

BC: They could have got some grants down the way, but we didn't get any grants to start it with, no, no. I put the first money in myself.

GB: Oh, really.

BC: I put the, of course this was back in 1963 to 1965, and I put up the first ten thousand dollars to pay the first, the salaries, you know, to open the doors. And then we sold some twenty year debenture bonds to help get it going.

GB: I'm going to ask you some general questions to wrap up. First off, have you observed change, besides the obvious growth, have you observed some changes in the Democratic Party, in its structure or in, you know, kind of philosophical beliefs over the past decades?

BC: I can, oh, no question. I've seen major changes in the Democratic Party. My goodness gracious, it started way back when Franklin Delano Roosevelt become president of the United States. As we look back in history now, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was one of the finest presidents that we had. He took us out of a Depression, you know, and as we all know he was elected for three terms, the only president that was ever elected for three terms. And then of course the president that most, made the most major decisions in the time he was president was Harry Truman. Here's a man that never went to, never went to college, okay, he was a haberdashery salesman and it just proves that you don't have to go to college to be a good leader,

and he was a good leader, he made some major decisions. And, no, I've seen, I've seen a lot of changes in the Democratic Party, although there's a few things that over the years that I haven't agreed with them a hundred percent on their thinking.

Well, on the whole, the thing I like most about the Democratic Party I guess is that they're more for the working person. I grew up on a farm with absolutely nothing and I struggled right straight up through all my life to get where I am today. And I've seen, oh, most of the people that are well to do and are well educated are, oh, what they call the white collar class I guess maybe, is the Republican Party. I had an aunt that lived to be a hundred and three years old and I loved her dearly. And she was a wonderful woman, but the only bad feature I could find about her, she was a staunch Republican. And if a person just got out of jail and run for an office she'd vote for him if he was a Republican. You couldn't change her mind on nothing. But anyway, no, I firmly believe in the Democratic Party. I've seen some, a lot of changes and a lot of good changes.

GB: And you think it's still true today that the Democratic Party is the party of the people?

BC: Oh absolutely, absolutely, absolutely, yeah.

GB: What are some of the things that you mention, that you've mentioned now and then there have been choices that you disagreed with? Do you recall any Democratic leaders who you had problems with?

BC: No, not right offhand I can't mention any, but there have been a few things that happened, okay?

GB: Finally, looking back on Ed Muskie's career, what do you think will be his legacy in Maine, what were his greatest contributions?

BC: I think he'll, I guess the main thing he's going to be known as the man that brought the Democratic Party to the state of Maine. He was the first one that was head and shoulders above anybody else in the Democratic Party, that, I think that's the biggest thing he's going to be known for.

GB: Well, I'm out of questions, so do you have any final remarks you'd like to make, anything you'd like to add or emphasize?

BC: No, I just, I'm just glad and happy I was born in America and given the opportunities that America offers me. And when I see some of the foreign countries, and the way that they have to bring up their children, I shudder. And no, I, right now it, I have had the good fortune of being quite successful, but right now I am dedicating my life to helping people that's not as fortunate, okay. Helping young people with scholarships and helping people that, oh, that need a helping hand for, you know, to, if they get behind the eight ball and need a few dollars, you know, or something like that, you know, if they've got a bright idea of, say, they think it might go and I agree with them I will help them, okay. And the thing is, just like the Field of Dreams that my wife and I are building, okay? This is something we're giving back to the town of Unity, it's

situated on twenty-seven acres up there. We have a regular baseball diamond, a little league diamond, a little league and softball combination diamond, a soccer field, a playground, a picnic area, a walking path, basketball court, a horseshoe pitching area, a tennis court, and it, it's manicured right to the umph degree. And we have set up a trust fund so it will always have perpetual care, after my wife and I have died. Twenty years from now, it'll look like a picture postcard. And it's free to everybody, okay? We just ask, everybody is welcome, and the only thing we ask is what you bring with you, you take home with you. Don't throw it on the ground because we can't pick up after you. And please don't (*unintelligible phrase*). So that's our gift back to the town.

GB: That's fantastic. You just brought to mind something else I wanted to ask you, I'm not sure how much you told me about this before but what caused the population of Unity to start growing again? Was it some of the success with these businesses?

BC: Well it's some of the things that we're doing here, we're creating jobs. This is one of my goals, too, to create jobs so people can stand on their own feet and be able to buy the things that they want. And, no, we've got a, I've got a holding company that, we've got a company up over the post office up there, we built sort of a common up there in 1995. We built a new bank which I thought the town of Unity needed, and we outgrew the post office that I built back in 1965, we built a new post office. Up over that post office we built space, we have a company up there called Exact Communications now. They employ over fifty people, the college employs over a hundred and twenty people. Thorndike Press up here is, they employ seventy-eight to eighty people, and now, just last year I bought the old Federal Trust Bank in Unity here that was vacant for a year and a half. We are now going to renovate that and we're going to start a health center down there. We're going to have three doctors down there plus eight staff people, and we've signed a contract, a ten year contract with Inlet hospital. And down here on School Street we've just had a young couple come in and buy the grocery store down there and renovate that. And we have one of the finest grocery stores there is anywhere in the state of Maine, right here in Unity, with plenty of parking. We have one of the finest restaurants with home cooked food, bakeries, right here in Unity. Unity has practically about everything that you could possibly want in a town. We have a dentist here, we have doctors here. The only thing we don't have right today is a veterinarian, and we're searching for a veterinarian.

GB: Sounds like with the progress you've made lately it might not be too far off.

BC: No, it's not, we're working on it. And we've got Unity Raceway here. Now, it's not everybody's cup of tea, but there's a lot of people that love automobile racing. So that's what we're doing, we're trying to bring in businesses, create jobs, you know, so people can work and be proud to do what they want.

GB: Well, it sounds like you've done some great things here.

BC: I hope so, I hope so. I hope a few people appreciate them.

GB: Well, it sounds like a good place to stop, so thank you very much.

BC: Entirely welcome.

End of Interview